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Austen and Dickens's Different Views on Their Female Characters and on Women in Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

By looking at how authors characterize their characters in novels, by analyzing how authors make their characters talk, behave, think, we can catch a glimpse of how they think of their characters, as well as a specific social group those characters represent. In this paper, we will focus on Jane Austen and Charles Dickens's different views on their female characters' nature and on nineteenth century women's nature in general by extension, based on their different female characterizations and their usages of language to do so in *Northanger Abbey* and *Oliver Twist*. Generally, this paper reaches the conclusion that Austen rejects female conformity in nineteenth century, while Dickens reinforces it.

Key words: Characterizations; Female conformity; Nineteenth century novels; *Northanger Abbey*; *Oliver Twist*

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INTRODUCTION

In general, I hold the view that Austen makes her female characters multifaceted in *Northanger Abbey*, while Dickens, in *Oliver Twist*, makes his one-dimensional. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen is very alert to the differences, or gaps, between different female characters, even in

minor ones: Catherine is everything but a heroine, who is fond of all boys' plays and does not care much about beauty; Isabella cares little about her friend's feelings, and pursues only after her own gratification; Eleanor is a lady of subtle and refined sensibility, and is intelligent and rational; although Mrs. Allen appears only in a few pages, her ordinariness and lack of sensitivity can still be sensed.

Dickens, however, makes many of his characters in *Oliver Twist*, especially female ones, idealized and therefore flat; they have similar traits, and talk, behave very much the same. Although it is probably because by simplifying them, identifying them with very obvious traits as they appear (such as a phrase they repeat often and striking physical characteristics), it is easier to remind reader of them, in a novel published serially, in long periods, and populated with so many characters (Forster, 1956); it is a fact that many of Dickens' female characters share similar traits: Mrs. Bedwin, Mrs. Maylie and Rose are extremely kind, caring, and altruistic, without many other distinguishing personal characteristics; Charlotte and Mrs. Sowerberry always follow what others say and do, and their personalities appear quite vague; ambivalent as Nancy is, she transforms to a pure, innocent, vulnerable victim in her last stage, and appears to be quite similar to characters we mentioned before.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In characterizing female characters in a novel, the usage of language to show how they talk and behave plays an essential part, and analyzing it closely in order to get general ideas about their attitudes towards female nature, from part to the whole, is therefore necessary. In following passages, comparison in usage of language to reinforce the characterization of Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, Rose Maylie, Mrs. Bedwin, Mrs. Maylie in *Oliver Twist*, will be discussed.

2. ANALYSIS OF TEXT

Catherine Morland is innocent, matter-of-fact, and too young to know much about life. She lives in a family that seldom aims at wit of any kind, and is therefore unworldly, not in the habit of telling lies and rejecting others. When she comes into the room after John, a man she does not like, asks her to go out, she hides to avoid his attention:

She fidgeted about if John Thorpe came towards her, hid herself as much as possible from his view, and when he spoke to her pretend not to hear him...she might not appear, however, to observe or expect him, she kept her eyes intently fixed on her fan. (Austen, 2008, p.53)

She does not talk; she is not used to using speeches to express her feelings because to her, words are too direct and hurting for others. Instead, she moves to make herself unnoticed, thus escape from John's attention. But even when doing so, she does not want to make John uncomfortable; she acts in a way quite negative, making herself as uninfluential as possible.

Later on, when John flatters her, saying he thinks she is the prettiest girl in Bath, she replies: "Oh! Nonsense! How can you say so?" and is "much less gratified" (Austen, 2008, p.69). She does not like flattery; she does not see beauty as an essential qualification of a girl either, or, she does not know or care how to use her beauty to achieve her goal. That can also be proved by the topics of conversations she has with others: most of them are about literature; almost none about relationships. Reasons of this lay both in her familial influence and in her nature.

Isabella Thorpe, on the other hand, is duplicitous and coquettish. She likes talking very much, and she frequently uses exaggerated, emphatic and categorical words in her speeches to take a false persona to cover the truth; she acts in a playful way intended to make men find her attractive when saying she does not like them at all at the same time. In the letter she writes to Catherine to free herself, she "has a thousand apologies to make", only loves James, abhors Captain Tilney the most and will never be plagued with him again, and has a pretty good nature of her own (Austen, 2008, p.159); when she is in Pump-room with Catherine, she intensely denies her looking for Captain Tilney by claiming:

"I am not looking for anybody. One's eyes must be somewhere, and you know that what a foolish trick I have for fixing mine, when my thoughts are an hundred miles off. I am amazingly absent; I believe I am the most absent creature in the world. Tilney says it is always the case with minds of a certain stamp." (Austen, 2008, p.103)

Her argument fills with inconsistent excuses; she likes to quote some so-called "general principles" to make them truthful, but they are abstract and empty. One's eyes must be on somewhere cannot explain why hers are "continually bent towards one door or the other, as in eager expectation", and the relationship between moving

eyes and absent mind does not make sense. Besides, Catherine is not likely to know how Isabella fixes her own eyes.

Yet when the person she is looking for enters, she "earnestly fixed her eyes on him as he spoke, and soon caught his notice", while she is saying she is sure he will not see them. She pouts and scolds him:

"Psha, nonsense! Why do you put such things into my head? If I could believe it—my spirit, you know, is pretty independent...my heart, indeed! What can you do with hearts? You men have none of you any hearts." (Austen, 2008, p.106)

She uses modal particle, exaggeration and enantiosis in a rather quick cadence, not to criticize, but to make Captain Tilney think she is an independent, attractive woman; to flirt with and to seduce him; that is soon after she knows James, her fiancé, is not as rich as she expects him to be. Her spirit does not seem to be independent at all. Unlike Catherine, Isabella can be seen as a gold-digger who is only interested in wealthy man, and whose mind is preoccupied by equality between subordinating to wealthy man and wealth.

In Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, however, many of his female characters seem to have very similar interior traits. Rose Maylie is kind, pure, and a little self-despised. When she rejects Harry for his love, she says:

"Yes, Harry, I owe it to myself that, a friendless, portion-less girl, with a blight upon my name, should not give the world reason to suspect that I had sordidly yielded to your first passion, and fastened myself, a clog, upon all your hopes and projects. I owe it to you and yours to prevent you from opposing, in the warmth of your generous nature, this great obstacle to your progress in the world." (Dickens, 2003, p.289)

In her speech, negative, inferior words toward herself (friendless, blight, sordid, clog, etc.) are constantly used, and she even sees herself as an obstacle, a clog, preventing Harry from his glorious future; it seems that she herself does not have value, that she does not see herself as an independent human-being; her value depends on the world's opinions to her; she is an appendage to others. There is a very strong contrast between the first half and the second half of her words, in which she owes every sordid, disdained thing to herself and every aspiring, wonderful thing to Harry. She despises passion; and she is so pure, vulnerable and innocent, that she implies: sacrifice me for your future.

Mrs. Bedwin is kind, gentle, caring. Seeing Oliver gradually recovered, she is "in a state of considerable delight", and "cried most violently" (Dickens, 2003, p.89). She says: "Never mind me, my dear. I'm only having a regular good cry." and asks Oliver to dress up, because "the better we look, the more Mr. Brownlow will be pleased" (Dickens, 2003, p.90). She never thinks of herself, because she asks others not to mind her; she does not mind herself either, for all she cares are others. She devotes herself; she is happy, crying violently, dressed up not because of her self-pleasure, but because of others'

pleasures. Similarly, Mrs. Maylie is also kind, caring and vulnerable. When Rose is suffering from a bad fever, she says in a trembling voice to Oliver:

“I have been very happy with her for some years; too happy, perhaps, and it may be time that I should meet with some misfortune of losing the dear girl who has so long been my comfort and happiness. Oh! What should I do without her!”
(Dickens, 2003, p.266)

Again, she is happy, because she is with Rose; she almost collapses, because Rose is in great pain; and she does not know what to do without Rose. All her pleasures, sufferings, fortune and misfortune depend on others; the topic of her speeches is always someone else, and she is the one who is marginalized and influenced by others. She does not have distinct individual traits; she smiles, cries, enjoys, suffers, but none of these is for herself. And like the other two, Dickens does not arrange for her words that exhibit her mental activities; He does not tell us, or perhaps does not care about what they are thinking about. Of all the three female characters discussed, their similar utterance show: they have no ego; they seek no value of themselves; they depend on others; they give and sacrifice everything, but ask for nothing.

OBSERVATIONS

From Austen and Dickens' descriptions of particular individuals, maybe we can catch a glimpse of their general ideas of women. By creating very different female characters in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen may think that, in general, women are varied and multifaceted. They have their independent ideas, and make their own choices. Maybe some traits of them are not in the line with mainstream values in society at that time, but they

are vivid, authentic, and human. Austen rejects female conformity; she thinks women are neither subordinating to men, nor mere belongings or decorations that are put in house, delicate but spiritless and out of touch with reality.

By establishing one-dimensional female characters in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens shows his general understandings of idealized women: they should be pure, innocent, sexless and vulnerable. They are perfect, but are deprived of all authenticity and freedom; they are virtuous, but only as the symbol of morality and order to save society from evil forces, rather than as real human-beings. He thinks that they do not have, or should not have ego; they are sacrificing, falling, yielding, dependent, and waiting to be rescued; they have no power to run their own destinies.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, differences in language using show Austen and Dickens' attitudes toward their female characters and toward woman in general. By portraying non-conventional female characters, Austen rejects the conformity required for Victorian women and attempts to change it with her writing, while Dickens, on the contrary, reinforces it by creating very typical female characters in Victorian era who are angelic and sacrificing.

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